

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

WILFRID WILSON GIBSON



Class 17

Book 2

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BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES



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BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

BY

WILFRID WILSON GIBSON

AUTHOR OF "DAILY BREAD," "¹FIRES," ETC.

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THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

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TO MY WIFE

1990

So long had I travelled the lonely road,
Though, now and again, a wayfaring friend
Walked shoulder to shoulder, and lightened the
 load,
I often would think to myself as I strode,
No comrade will journey with you to the end.

And it seemed to me, as the days went past,
And I gossiped with cronies, or brooded alone,
By wayside fires, that my fortune was cast
To sojourn by other men's hearths to the last,
And never to come to my own hearthstone.

The lonely road no longer I roam.
We met, and were one in the heart's desire.
Together we came, through the wintry gloam,
To the little old house by the cross-ways, home;
And crossed the threshold, and kindled the fire.

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BORDERLANDS

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

SCENE: *The Queen's Crag, a fantastic group of rocks and boulders on the fells. MICHAEL CROZIER, a young hind, lies in the evening glow at the foot of the tallest crag, with a far-away look in his eyes. Presently GEORGE DODD, an old hind, enters and stops on seeing MICHAEL.*

GEORGE

Of all the lazy louts!

It's here, then, that you moon away the
evenings,

Stretched like a collie, basking in the sun,

Your noble self for company!

At your age, Michael, lad,

I'd have thought shame to find myself alone,

A night like this:

And such a lass as Peggie, lonesome, too.

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

I wasted little time, when I was young;
And lost no Summer evenings by myself.
I always was a lad among the lasses,
And not a moony, moping gowk like you.
No sooner was I through,
Than I was washed and out.
Sunlight, moonlight, starlight, dark,
I never missed the screeching of the owls,
Nor listened to it lonesome.
But you, I've never seen you with a lass:
Though Peggie Haliburton, she . . .
Lad, take your pleasure, while you're young,
And Summer nights be fine.
Though youth and Summer nights seem long—
Long enough to last for ever,
For ever and a day,
Before you've looked about a bit,
Old age and Winter are upon you.

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

To-day you're lithe and lusty,
And to-morrow,
A grizzled, pithless, aching bag-of-bones.
And Peggie Haliburton, too,
The lass was made for love and Summer nights:
Yet she's out walking with herself,
And no one by to see her but the peewits,
Or, maybe, a cock grouse or so:
A bonnie young thing wasting.

(He pauses, looking at MICHAEL, who pays little heed, but still lies with a far-away look in his eyes.)

But, maybe, Michael, you're like me,
And cannot 'bide red hair?
I never liked a red-haired wench,
If there was any other by.
Red . . . it's the colour of the fox and
kestrel,

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

And stoat and weasel, and such thieves and
vermin.

And, as for stock, if I could have my way,
I shouldn't have a red beast on the farm.
I'd never let a chestnut stallion whinny
Within a mile of Skarlindyke.

I'd sell all chestnut colts and fillies:

The red bull, too, should go:

And no red heifer should come nigh the
byres.

I'd have all black, coal-black:

Black stallions and black mares:

Black bulls, black stirks and heifers:

All black, save tups and ewes:

I'm somehow not so partial to black sheep.

But, in this world, we cannot all be farmers,

And lords of all creation.

Still, even hinds may have their fancies:

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

And you and I, lad, cannot 'bide red hair:
And so, red Peggy walks alone.
Ay! and it seems that hinds can hold their
tongues,
At least, the youngsters can;
For my old tongue keeps wagging,
And wags to little purpose seemingly.
It must have lost its sting;
Or, Peggy's not in favour.

(A pause.)

Well, Mister Mum, you've chosen a snug
corner
To stretch your lazy bones in.

*(Sitting down by MICHAEL, with his back against
the rock.)*

I think I'll bear you company awhile,
If you can call a hedgehog company,

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

Tight-curved, and prickles bristling!
Still, though you mayn't be over-lively,
You're livelier than Myself.
I find him but glum company—
A grumpy, sulky beggar,
Who keeps on telling me I'm getting old,
And 'minding me of happiness gone by.
Myself and I were never fellows:
But ill-yoked at the best of times,
We seldom pulled together:
And, Lord! the times that we've upset the
 cart!
So you must serve to keep the peace between
 us,
By listening to my chatter.
I'm always happiest, talking,
For then I needn't listen to Myself.
Though I, when I was your age, Michael,

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

I should have scorned an old man's company,
While any lass . . .
And on Midsummer Eve!

*(He pauses again: then resumes, pointing to a pil-
lared rock, standing apart from the others.)*

So, yon's the tooth, chipped out of the
Queen's comb,

When Arthur pitched a rock at her,
While she was combing out her yellow hair:

And he, at his own Crag, a mile away!

It must have been a spanker of a comb,

To bear so brave a tooth!

I wonder what she'd said, to make him pitch
it . . .

Though likely she'd said nothing,

But just sat combing out her yellow hair,

And combing, combing, combing.

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

A woman with a devil in her tongue,
When she plays mum, is far more aggravat-
ing.

Sometimes, when Susan sits and combs her
hair,

At night, like Arthur's Queen,
And combs, and combs,
Till I'm half-mad with watching from the bed,
I only stop Myself,—
The surly chap who wants the light out,—
Just in the nick of time
To loose the pillow from his clutch.
King Arthur must have been a handsome lad,
To chuck a pebble that size near a mile.
But, there were giants in those days:
And he . . .

MICHAEL

A lie!

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

GEORGE

A lie? Of course, it's all a lie:
But it's a brave lie, Michael!
I doubt if there was ever King or Queen,
In these outlandish parts.

MICHAEL

There was a Queen,
Though she was not a giant.
She was no bigger than . . .
Than you, or me . . .
Or Peggy . . . she was nearer Peggy's height.

GEORGE

You seem to know a deal about her, Michael.
Just Peggy's height?
And red-haired, too, I'll warrant?
You've found your tongue:

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

And got it pat:

And all the gospel truth!

But, how d'you come by so much truth, I
wonder?

Scarcely by honest means, I doubt.

And how d'you know . . .

MICHAEL

Because I've seen her.

GEORGE

Who?

MICHAEL

The Queen.

GEORGE

You've seen the Queen?

Well, that's a brave one, Michael!

Myself can sometimes tell a little one;

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

But he was ever but a craven liar.
His were but cheepy bantams, barely hatched:
While yours, why, it's a strutting cock, and
 crowing,
Comb pricked, and hackles quivering!
There's nothing like a big, bold, brazen lie
To warm the blood . . .

MICHAEL

I'm telling truth.
I've seen her twice.

GEORGE

Nay! stop, before you spoil it all.
A lie, blown out too big, will burst.

MICHAEL

It is no lie . . .
I saw the Queen, herself.

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

GEORGE

You saw her . . . where?

MICHAEL

I saw her here.

GEORGE

Here? In the Crag?

I trust she's not here now:

And listening down behind the rock.

Lord! if she'd heard Myself about the comb-
ing!

But Queens should be above eavesdropping;
And know the luck of listeners.

Though, how d'you know her, lad, for Ar-
thur's Queen?

Did she sing out:

"Hi! lad, I'm Arthur's Queen!"

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

MICHAEL

She wore a crown . . .

A golden crown . . .

GEORGE

I saw a Queen once, with a golden crown;

And sitting on a golden throne,

Set high upon a monster golden ball,

Drawn in a golden chariot through the streets

By four-and-twenty little piebald ponies,

At Hexham, on a fairday, long ago . . .

Ay, long ago, in my young days,

When circuses were circuses.

They made a brave procession through the
town,

To draw the folk in after them . . .

Though outside shows are usually the brav-
est . . .

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

But, not that time . . .

She was a Queen, a black-eyed, gypsy
Queen . . .

Black eyes that sparked . . .

And tilted chin . . .

You never saw . . .

MICHAEL

Mine was no circus-queen.

I saw her first, when I was but a boy,

Six years ago, to-day . . . Midsummer
Eve . . .

I'd spent the whole day, playing round the
Crag

At Kings and castles,

Crowning or killing,

Or conquering myself,

Or putting black-faced bands

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

Of robber-sheep to rout;
Or seeking to take, unawares,
Some traitor stoat or weasel
That spied on my dominions.
When, ere I knew,
The sky was black,
And broke in flame,
And burst in thunder . . .
And rain, such rain . . .
Lightning, flash on flash . . .
Thunder, brattle after brattle . . .
Rain and rain . . .
You never saw such rain—
One pelting, crashing, teeming, drenching
 downpour.
Soaked to the skin, in no time,
And scared out of my senses,
I crept into a hole among the rocks,

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

A hole I'd never spied before,
No bigger than a fox's earth.
I had to wriggle on my belly,
To squeeze myself in, head first;
And half-expecting, every moment,
To feel a vixen's teeth,
Though more I feared the lightning at my
 heels.

When, all at once, my arms were free:
And, lifting up my head, I found
I'd almost crawled into a chamber,
A big square chamber in the rock,
That I had ne'er heard tell of—
Four blue and shiny walls, that soared
Sheer to the sky—a still and starry sky,
Though, in the world without, black storm
 was raging.

But, I'd no eyes for stars,

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

Nor even wits to wonder at the quiet.
My eyes were on the Queen,
Who sat beside a hearth of burning peats,
Right in the middle of the chamber;
A golden crown upon her golden head;
And she was spinning golden wool,
That flickered in the firelight,
Until it seemed that she was spinning flame,
Or her own fire-bright hair.

GEORGE

Red hair! And she'd red hair . . .
Then, you had only snoozed;
And dreamt of Peggy.
I saw my queen by daylight.

MICHAEL

Peggy!
I tell you, 'twas the Queen.

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

I saw her, plainly as I see yon rabbit;
She wore a furry cloak of weasel skins,
Or something like,
Though round the neck 'twas white—
White as yon rabbit's scut . . .
For it was mortal cold in that stone chamber.

GEORGE

Was anybody with her?

MICHAEL

I only saw the Queen,
And her, but for a moment.
She lifted up her eyes;
And I was frightened . . .
And wriggled backwards like an adder,
Till I was in the storm again.

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

And then, I scuttled home—
A rabbit to its warren —
Across the splashy heather:
The lightning, playing round my heels,
The thunder, rattling round my head,
Though it was not the lightning or the
thunder
That scared me now . . .
I'd not a thought for them . . .
My heart was flying from that quiet cham-
ber
That stone-cold chamber, roofed with quiet
stars . . .
And from the eyes . . .
The eyes I had not seen.

GEORGE

And where's this stony chamber, then?

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

MICHAEL

I never found the way to it again,
Though I've ransacked the Craggs for it,
Since I grew big, and bolder.

GEORGE

A vixen in her den,
For she'd be red enough.
Yet, you'd have felt her teeth for certain!
It must have been a dream.

MICHAEL

I might have thought so, too,
Had I not seen the Queen, again.

GEORGE

Again?
I saw my Queen, again, too.
But what was your Queen's name?

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

MICHAEL

Queen Guinevere.

GEORGE

Mine had a braver name.

They called her, Donna Bella di Braganza,
Castilian Queen of the Equestrian World.

I spelled it out upon the rainbow bills

The clown, who wagged the tail of the pro-
cession,

Was scattering from his donkey-cart.

I saw my Queen again . . .

My gypsy Queen!

My black-haired, black-eyed gypsy . . .

You, and your red-haired Queens!

I'd give a world of red-haired Guineveres,

To see those gypsy eyes again . . .

(A pause.)

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

I smell the sawdust now . . . and oranges . . .

'Twas in the tent . . .

She'd doffed her robes and crown . . .

I knew her by the flashing of her eyes,

Tripping nimbly into the ring,

So brave in yellow silk, skin-fitting silk,

Yellow as dandelions,

And sprinkled all with spangles;

And yellow ribbons in her hair,

Her jet-black hair that hung about her shoulders.

I see her tripping now into the ring,

With flashing eyes and teeth,

Clean-limbed, and mettlesome as the coal-black mare,

Coal-black from mane to fetlocks,

That pawed and champed to greet her . . .

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

And there's naught bonnier than a bonnie
mare . . .

She clapped its glossy neck:

It nuzzled her:

Then ere I knew,

She'd lighted on its flanks,

Nimble and springy as a thistle-down:

And they were racing round the ring to-
gether,

She, standing tip-toe,

And with ne'er a rein,

A straw between her teeth,

Her flashing teeth . . .

And tilted chin . . .

And flashing eyes . . .

Her beautiful long hair, as black and silky,

As black and silky as the mare's long mane,

Was streaming out behind . . .

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

And ribbons streaming . . .
Spangles sparkling . . .
Sawdust flying,
Whips, a-cracking . . .
Music, playing . . .
And now, she sprang
Through flaming hoops,
And my heart, through the fire with her,
And lighted on the steamy flanks:
And on, and on,
And round, and round the ring,
Till I was dazzled dizzy,
And out of breath, but watching her.
And what, with crack of whips . . .
Thudding thresh of hoofs . . .
Smell of spirting sawdust . . .
Crash of drums and trumpets . . .
Flaming hoops of fire . . .

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

Flying hair . . .

Yellow ribbons . . .

Flashing teeth . . .

And flashing eyes . . .

My blood was mad, was mad for her,

I wanted to be flying round,

For ever flying round with her,

For ever, and for ever . . .

I wanted her

As I have never wanted woman,

Before or since . . .

(A pause.)

And yet, I've little doubt

That she'd have been a poor hand with the
porridge,

And poorer at the milking,

Though she could manage horses;

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

And, maybe, 'twas as well
That I walked home that night with Susan.
Within nine months, we'd wedded.
There's naught amiss with Susan's porridge,
And she could milk a stone.
She's been a good and careful wife enough.
She never spares herself . . . nor me.
Though, I dare say, I'm even more a trial
To her, than to myself.
And, though I'm often harking back,
And sometimes hanker . . .
Somehow, I cannot see the Donna Bella,
In yellow skin-tights, cleaning out the byre!
And yet!

MICHAEL

I saw Queen Guinevere, again,
Three years ago, upon Midsummer Eve.
She sat upon a little hill, and sang:

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

And combed her long red hair, beside the
lough—

Just sitting like a leveret in the sun
To sleek its fur—

And all about her, grey snipe darted, drum-
ming.

She combed her long red hair
That tumbled down her shoulders,
Her long hair, red as bracken,
As bracken in October;
And with a gleam of wind in it,
A light of running water.

Her crown was in the heather, at her feet:
And, now and then, a snipe would perch
upon it;

And with his long neb preen his gleaming
feathers,

As if to mock the Queen,

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

Queen Guinevere, a-combing her long hair
That tumbled over a gown of blue . . .
As blue and shimmery as a mallard's neck . . .
And with a light of running water:
And, as she sang, 'twas like the curlew call-
ing,
And rippled through my heart like curlew
calling,
Like curlew calling in the month of April,
And with a clear cool noise of running water.

I dropped upon my belly in the bracken:
And lay and watched her, combing her red
hair:
And hearkened to her singing . . .
And I was sorry, when she'd done, at last,
And took her long red hair, and twisted it,
And fixed it with a golden pin.

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

Though she'd but little need of crown,
Whose hair was golden crown enough,
She stooped to take her gold crown from the
 heather,

And set it on her brow:

Then stood upright,

Stood like a birch-tree in the wind,

A silver birch-tree in the sunset wind

That ripples through its leaves like running
 water;

The little snipe about her drumming . . .

And then, I looked into her eyes,

Looked into golden pools,

Pools, golden 'neath October bracken . . .

And into the heart of fire . . .

(A pause.)

A shrew's cold muzzle touched my hand,

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

Among the bracken, startling me . . .

And she was gone . . .

GEORGE

(After a pause.)

And so, the leveret bolted!

You never saw her more?

So all tales end . . .

At least the true tales told by life itself.

Though I . . . I saw my Queen again . . .

Yet . . . with a difference . . .

'Twas at the next fair after I was married.

I thought I'd like a glimpse of her once more:

Though I had much ado, persuading Susan:

She'd never been inside a circus;

And thought it sorry waste of silver.

But, once inside the tent,

She liked it well enough:

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

And gaped and grinned her money's worth.
And I . . . I sat, and waited,
And waited for my gypsy . . .
And snuffed the smell of sawdust:
While Susan giggled at the clown—
A yellow-legged old corncrake—
And nudged me with her elbow;
And asked me if I'd ever heard the like.
But, I'd no ears nor eyes
For any save my gypsy . . .
And she . . . she never came.
Another woman rode the coal-black mare—
A red-haired jumping-jenny—
And there was cracking whips . . .
And sawdust flying . . .
Drums and trumpets . . .
Flaming hoops . . .
And all the razzle-dazzle . . .

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

But not my black-eyed gypsy.
And I sat, waiting still, when all was over,
Until the tent was empty . . .
Sat waiting for the Donna Bella . . .
Till Susan tugged me by the jacket,
And asked if I'd sit gaping there all night.
She got me out, at last.
And then . . . I met her . . .
Met her, face to face,
My gypsy Queen!
But, oh! . . . how changed . . .
Except her eyes . . .
I knew her by her eyes:
For they still flashed and sparkled,
Though she was bent and hunched,
And hobbled with a crutch.
She'd had a tumble, since I'd seen her flying
Around the ring, as light as thistle-down.

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

She clutched me with a skinny hand,
Wanting to tell my fortune:
But Susan wouldn't let her:
She said, a married man had got his fortune;
So needn't waste his earnings.
The gypsy bit the straw between her teeth,
Her flashing teeth;
And, tilting her proud chin,
She laughed at that, with merry eyes
Twinkling 'neath her yellow kerchief—
Dandelion yellow—
Bound about her jet-black hair,
The hair that I'd seen flying free . . .
And when she laughed,
And looked into my eyes . . .
The heather was afire . . .
I could have caught her to me,
There and then . . .

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

Whipped her up, and run with her
To the world's end, and over . . .
But, Susan . . . dragging on my arm . . .
Ay! broken as she was,
And hunched and hobbling,
I would have wedded her outright,
Had it not been for Susan . . .
I lost her in the crowd . . .
And never saw her more . . .

(Pause.)

And so, went home to decent porridge:
And 'twas as well, maybe.
A man must have his meat, if he's to work,
And victuals count for much.
And Susan's ever been a careful wife,
And had no easy time of it.

(Pause.)

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

But, love's a queer thing, Michael.

It comes to you . . . like that!

(Striking his hands together.)

I've known a man walk seven miles each night

To see a woman's shadow on the blind.

And, in the end,

It's one, and one alone, that holds you,

Be 't Donna Bella, Guinevere, or Peggy.

(Pause.)

But you . . . you never saw your carrotty

Queen,

Combing her long red hair again, I'll warrant.

MICHAEL

(Slowly, as in a trance.)

I saw her once, upon Midsummer Eve,

Six years ago . . .

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

I saw her, twice, upon Midsummer Eve,
Three years ago . . .
I'll see her thrice . . .

GEORGE

And, it's Midsummer Eve!

MICHAEL

(Listening.)

And nigh the hour . . .
And hark, the snipe a-drumming!

GEORGE

You cannot think . . .
It's all a pack of lies . . .
Or else, you're daft, clean daft!
Your eyes are queer and wild. . . .
You do not see her now?

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

No! No! I thought not!
It's all stuff and nonsense,
Your silly tale about a red-haired Queen,
Who's been dead dust a thousand years, or
more.

MICHAEL

(Leaping to his feet.)

She's coming . . . coming now . . .

GEORGE

(Leaping up, too, and gripping Michael's arm.)

No! No!

You're crazy, surely . . .

Yet . . . queer things happen on the fells, at
times . . .

And on Midsummer Eve . . .

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

MICHAEL

(Listening more intently.)

She's drawing slowly nearer . . .

I hear her silks a-rustling through the
grass . . .

GEORGE

(Listening too.)

I seem to hear . . .

What are you gaping at?

MICHAEL

(Looking up.)

The Queen! The Queen!

(They both stand, spellbound, gazing at a woman standing on the crest of a boulder, burning like a golden flame in the last rays of the setting sun. Presently, looking down, and seeing them, she laughs.)

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

GEORGE

(Shaking himself, while Michael still stands, spell-bound.)

It's Peggy Haliburton, after all!

(To Peggy.)

Why, Michael said: 'twas Arthur's Queen.

He called her some outlandish name;

And said, she'd long red foxy hair,

And eyes like pools;

And sang just like the curlew.

But he'll be telling you himself:

For, all along, I knew 'twas you he meant.

Men's tongues wag madly on Midsummer
Eve:

And I've been talking, too,

A pack of nonsense,

As Michael, here, could tell you,

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

If he'd not too much sense to heed
An old man's witless blathering.
Well, I had best be going;
And getting home to Susan.
She doesn't hold with owls, and such like.

1912

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

Bloodybush Edge is a remote spot on the borderline between England and Scotland, marked by a dumpy obelisk, on which is inscribed an old scale of tolls. A rough sandy road runs down across the dark moors, into England on the one hand, and into Scotland on the other. It is a fine, starry night in early September. DAFT DICK, a fantastic figure, in appearance half-gamekeeper, half-tramp (dressed as he is in cast-off clothes of country-gentlemen) swings up the road from the Scottish side, singing.

“Now Liddisdale has ridden a raid;
But I wat they better hae stayed at hame;
For Michael o’ Winfield, he lies dead;
And Jock o’ the Side is prisoner ta’en.”

He stands for a moment, looking across the fells, which are very dark, in spite of the starry sky; then flings himself down in the heather, with his back to the obelisk, and lights his pipe. Pres-

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

ently, he sees a dark figure, stumbling with uncertain steps across the boggy moor; and watches it keenly as it approaches, until it reaches the road, when he sees that it is a strange man, evidently a tramp.

TRAMP

A track, at last, thank God!

DICK

Ay, there be whiles
When beaten tracks are welcome.

TRAMP

Who the . . . Oh!
I didn't count on having company
Again in this world; and when I heard a
voice
I thought it must be another ghost. It's
queer

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

Hearing a voice bleat when you haven't
heard

A mortal voice for ages. I've not changed
A word with a soul since noon; and when you
spoke

It gave me quite a turn. A feather, Lord!
But it wouldn't take the shadow of a feather
To knock me over. I'm in such a stickle,
Dead-beat, and fit to drop. To drop! I've
dropped

A hundred times already, humpty-dumpty!
Why, I've been tumbling in and out black
holes,

Since sunset, on that god-forsaken moor,
Half-crazed with fear of . . . Ah, you've got
a light:

And I've been tramping all the livelong
day

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

With a pipeful of comfort in my waistcoat-
pocket;

And would have swopt the frizzling sun it-
self;

For a match to kindle it. Thanks, mate,
that's better.

And now, what was it you were saying, Old
Cock,

When I mistook you then for Hamlet's
father?

Lord! if you'd seen him at the "Elephant,"
In queer, blue sheeny armour, you'd have
shivered.

"I am thy father's spirit," he says, like that,
Down in his boots. But you were saying——

DICK

There are times

When beaten tracks are welcome.

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

TRAMP

True for you:

And truer by a score of bumps, for me.

My neck's been broken half-a-dozen times:

My body's just an aching bag of bones.

I'm one big bruise from top to toe, as though

I'd played in the Cup Final, as the ball.

And mud, I'm mud to the eyes, and over,
carrying

Half of the country that I've passed through
on me.

My best suit, too! And I was always faddy
About my clothes. My mother used to call
me

Finicky Fred. If she could see me now!

I couldn't count the times that I've pitched
headlong

Into black bog.

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

DICK

Ay, there are clarty bits
In Foulmire Moss. But what set you strav-
aging
Among the peat-hags at this time of night?
Unless you know the tracks by heart. . . .

TRAMP

I know

The Old Kent Road by heart.

DICK

The Old Kent Road?

TRAMP

London, S. E. You've heard of London,
likely?

DICK

Ay! Ay! I've heard. . . .

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

TRAMP

Well, mate, I've walked from London.

DICK

You've walked from London, here?

TRAMP

Well, not to-day.

It must be nigh three hundred mile, I reckon.

Just five weeks, yesterday, since I set out:

But, as you say, I've walked from London, here:

Though where "here" is the devil only knows!

What is "here" called, if it has any name

But Back o' Beyond, or World's End, eh?

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

DICK

You're sitting
On Bloodybush Edge this moment.

TRAMP

To think of that!
Bloodybush Edge! And that's what I have
come to;
While all my friends, the men and women I
know,
Are strolling up and down the Old Kent
Road,
Chattering and laughing by the lighted
stalls
And the barrows of bananas and oranges;
Or sitting snugly in bars; and here am I,
On Bloodybush Edge, talking to Hamlet's
father.

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

DICK

My name's Dick Dodd.

TRAMP

Well, no offence, Old Cock!

And Hamlet's father was a gentleman,
A king of ghosts; and Lord! but he could
groan.

My name's . . . Jack Smith: and Jack
would give a sovereign,

A sovereign down, if he could borrow it,
And drinks all around, and here's to you, and
you!

Just to be sitting in The Seven Stars,
And listening to the jabber, just to snuff
A whiff of the smoke and spirit. Seven Stars!
I'm lodging under stars enough to-night:
Seven times seven hundred. . . .

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

DICK

Often I have tried
To count them, lying here upon my back:
But they're too many for me. Just when
you think
You've reckoned all between two sprigs of
heather,
One tumbles from its place, or else a hundred
Spring out of nowhere. If you only stare
Hard at the darkest patch, for long enough
You'll see that it's all alive with little stars;
And there isn't any dark at all.

TRAMP

No dark!

If you'd been tumbling into those black
holes,
You'd not think overmuch of these same
stars.

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

I couldn't see my hand before me. Stars!
Give me the lamps along the Old Kent Road:
And I'm content to leave the stars to you.
They're well enough; but hung a trifle high
For walking with clean boots. Now a lamp
or so . . .

DICK

If it's so fine and brave, the Old Kent Road,
How is it you came to leave it?

TRAMP

I'd my reasons.

DICK

Reasons! Queer reasons surely to set you
trapesing
Over Foulmire in the dark: though I could
travel

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

The fells from here to Cheviot, blindfold. Ay!
And never come a cropper.

TRAMP

'Twas my luck,
My lovely luck, and naught to do with rea-
sons—

My gaudy luck, and the devilish dust and heat,
And hell's own thirst that drove me; and too
snug

A bed among the heather. Oversleeping,
That's always played the mischief with
me. Once

I slept till three in the morning, and . . .

DICK

Till three?

You're an early bird, if you call that over-
sleeping.

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

Folk hereabouts are mostly astir by three:
But, city-folk, I thought. . . .

TRAMP

I'm on the night-shift.
I sleep by day, for the most part, like a cat.
That's why, though dog-tired now, I couldn't
sleep
A wink though you paid me gold down.

DICK

Night-shift, you!
And what may your job be? Cat's night-
shift, likely,
As well as day's sleep!

TRAMP

Now, look here, Old Cock,
There's just one little thing that we could
teach you

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

Down London way. Why, even babes in
London

Know better than to ask too many questions.
You ask no questions, and you'll hear no
lies,

Is the first lesson that's hammered into them.
No London gentleman asks questions. Lord!
If you went "What's-your-job?"-ing down
our way

You'd soon be smelling someone's fist I
reckon;

Or tripping over somebody in the dark
Upon the stairs: and with a broken neck,
Be left, still asking questions in your coffin,
Till the worms had satisfied you. Not that I
Have anything to hide, myself. I'm only
Advising you for your own good. But, Old
Chap,

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

We were talking of something else . . . that
hell-hot road

I'd pegged along it through the blazing dust
From Bellingham, till I could peg no more,
My mouth was just a limekiln; and each
foot

One bleeding blister. A kipper on the grid,
That's what I was on the road. And the
heather looked

So cool and cosy, I left the road for a bit;
And coming on a patch of wet green moss,
I took my boots off; and it was so champion
To feel cold water squelching between my
toes,

I paddled on like a child, till I came to a
clump

Of heather in full bloom, just reeking honey;
And curled up in it, and dropt sound asleep;

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

And, when I wakened, it was dark, pitch-
dark,

For all your stars. The sky was light enough,
Had I been travelling that way. But, for the
road,

I hadn't a notion of its whereabouts.

A blessed babe-in-the-woods I was, clean
lost,

And fit to cry for my mammy. Babes-in-
the-wood!

But there were two of them, for company,
And only one of me, by my lone self.

However, I said to myself: You've got to
spend

A night in the heather. Well, you've known
worse beds,

And worse bed-fellows than a sheep or so—
Trying to make believe I wasn't frightened.

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

And then, somehow, I couldn't, God knows
why!

But I was scared: the loneliness, and all;
The quietness, and the queer creepy noises;
And something that I couldn't put a name
to,

A kind of feeling in my marrow bones,
As though the great black hills against the
sky

Had come alive about me in the night;
And they were watching me; as though I
stood

Naked, in a big room, with blind men sitting,
Unseen, all round me, in the quiet darkness,
That was not dark to them. And all the
stars

Were eyeing me; and whisperings in the
heather

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

Were like cold water trickling down my spine:
And when I heard a cough. . . .

DICK

A coughing sheep.

TRAMP

May be: but 'twas a coughing ghost to me.
I've never yet set eyes on a ghost, unless
 . . . (*looking askance at DICK*)
Though I've often felt them near me. Once,
 when I . . .
But, Lord, I'm talking, talking . . .

DICK

I've seen ghosts,
A hundred times. The ghosts of reivers ride
The fells at night; and you'd have ghosts in
 plenty

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

About you, lad, though you were blind to
them.

But, why d' you fear them? There's no harm
in ghosts.

Even should they ride over you, it's only
Like a cold wind blowing through you. The
other night,

As I came down by Girsonsfield, the ghost
Of Percy Reed, with neither hands nor
feet,

Rode clean through me; the false Halls, and
the Croziers

Hard on his heels, though I kept clear of
them;

And often I've heard him, cracking his
hunting-crop,

On a winter's night, when the winds were in
full cry;

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

And heard the yelp of the pack, and the
horn's halloo,

Over the howl of the storm, or caught at
dawn

A glimpse of the tails of his green hunting-
jacket.

Whenever you shudder, or break in a cold
sweat,

Not knowing why, folk say that someone's
stepping

Over your grave; but that's all stuff and
nonsense.

It's only some poor ghost that's walking
through you.

TRAMP

Well, ghosts or sheep, I'd had my fill of
them;

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

Went all to pieces, took to my heels and
ran;

And hadn't run three yards, when I pitched
headlong.

That was the first. Since then, I've felt the
bottom

Of every hole, five hundred to my reckon-
ing,

From there to here.

DICK

You've covered some rough ground.
But you have doubled back upon your tracks
If you were making North.

TRAMP

Ay: I was making
For Scotland. I'd a notion . . .

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

DICK

Scotland lies
Under your left heel, though your right's in
England.

TRAMP

To think of that! Well, I can't feel much
difference

Twixt one and the other. Perhaps, if I'd
my boots off . . .

But, Hamlet's father, isn't it a king's bed
We're lying on, and sprawling over two coun-
tries!

And yet, I'd rather be in Millicent Place,
London, S. E., and sleeping three in a bed.
This room's too big for me, too wide and
windy;

The bed, too broad, and not what I call snug:
The ceiling, far too high, and full of eyes.

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

I hate the loneliness. I like to feel
There are houses, packed with people, all
about me
For miles on miles: I'm fond of company;
I'm only really happy in a throng,
Crowds jostling thick and hot about me. Here
I feel, somehow, as if I were walking naked
Among the hills, the last man left alive.
I haven't so much as set eyes on a house,
Not since I left that blistering road.

DICK

The nearest

Is three miles off, or more.

TRAMP

Well, country-people
Should be good neighbours, and quiet; but,
for me,

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

I'd rather be packed like herrings in a barrel.

I hate the loneliness: it makes me think. . .

I'm fond of company; too fond at times.

If I hadn't been so fond of company

A while back, I'd have hardly been lying
now

On Bloodybush Edge, talking of ghosts at
midnight,

When I might be . . . but it won't bear
thinking on.

Yet, even with you beside me, Bloodybush
Edge

Is a size too big in beds—leaves too much
room

For ghosts, to suit my fancy. Three in a
bed,

And you sleep sound.

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

DICK

And why should you fear ghosts,
When, one fine night, you'll be a ghost your-
self?

How soon, who knows! Why, even at this
moment,

If you had broken your neck among the
moss-hags

You'd be your own ghost sitting there, not
you.

If you hadn't been so muddy, and so fright-
ened . . .

Nay; but I've seen too many ghosts in my
time

For you to take me in. Ghosts often lean
Over me, when I'm fishing in the moonlight.
They're keen, are ghosts. I sometimes feel
their breath

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

Upon my neck, when I am guddling trout;
Or the clutch of their clammy fingers on my
wrist

When I am spearing salmon, lest I miss.
And always at the burning of the water
You'll see them lurking in the shadows, be-
yond

The flare and the smoke of the torches, in
the night,
Eager as boys to join in the sport; and at
times,

When they have pressed too near, and a
torch has flared,
I've seen the live flame running through their
bodies.

But oftenest they appear to me when alone
I'm fishing like a heron; and last night
As I stooped over Deadwater, I felt . . .

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

TRAMP

And you're an honest man to be asking questions

Of gentlemen on tour! So, you're a poacher,
A common poacher: though it must be rare
sport,

I've often fancied . . .

DICK

To creep up to a pool
Where a big bull-trout lies beneath a boulder
With nose against the stream, his tail scarce
flicking;

To creep up quiet and without a shadow,
And lie upon your belly in the gravel;
And slide your hands as noiseless as an otter
Into the water, icy-cold and aching,
And tickle, tickle, till you have him fuddled;

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

Then lift him, cold and slithery, from the
burn,
A quivering bit of silver in the moonlight . . .

TRAMP

Ay, that must be rare sport; but, for myself,
I'd rather manage without the help of ghosts.
Once, I remember, I was bending down—
'Twas in an empty house . . . I'd cut my
thumb,
The window jamming somehow, a nasty cut:
The mark's still there . . . (not that! nay,
that's the place
I was bitten by a friend) and as I fumbled
With a damned tricky lock, some Yankee patent,
I felt a ghost was standing close behind me,

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

And dared not stir, or squint over my shoulder:

But crouched there, moving neither hand
nor foot,

Till I was just a solid ache of terror,

And could have squealed aloud with the
numb cramp,

And pins and needles in my arms and
legs.

And then at last, when I was almost dropping,

I lost my head, took to my heels, and bolted
Headfirst down stairs, and through the
broken window,

Leaving my kit and the swag, without a
thought:

And never coming to my senses, till

I saw a bullseye glimmering down the lane.

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

And then I found my brow was bleeding,
too—

At first I thought 'twas sweat—a three-inch
cut,

Clean to the bone. I had to have it stitched.
I told the doctor that I'd put my head
Through a window in the dark, but not a word
About my body following it. The doctor,
He was a gentleman, and asked no questions.
A civil chap: he'd stitched my scalp before
Once, when the heel of a lady's slipper . . .

DICK

So you
Are a common poacher, too; although you
take

Only dead silver and gold. Still it must be
A risky business, burgling, when the folk . . .

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

TRAMP

Risk! ay, there's risk! That's where the fun
comes in;

To steal into a house, with people sleeping
So warm and snug and innocent overhead;
To hear them snoring as you pass their doors
With all they're dreaming of stowed in your
pockets;

To tiptoe from the attic to the basement,
With a chance that you may find on any
landing

A door flung open, and a man to tackle.

It's only empty houses I'm afraid of.

I've more than once looked up a pistol's
snout,

And never turned a hair . . . though once I
heard

A telephone-bell ring in an empty house—

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

And I can hear the damned thing tinkling
yet . . .

I'm all in a cold sweat just thinking of it.

It tinkled, tinkled . . . Risk! Why man
alive,

Life's all a risky business, till you're dead.

There's no risk then . . . unless . . . I never
feared

A living man, sleeping or waking, yet.

But ghosts, well, ghosts are different some-
how. There's

A world of difference between men and
ghosts.

Let's think no more of ghosts—but lighted
streets,

And crowds, and women; though it's my be-
lief

There's not a woman in all this country-side.

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

DICK

There's womenfolk, and plenty. And they
are kind,

The womenfolk, to me. Daft Dick is ever
A favourite with the womenfolk. His belly
Would oft go empty, were it not for them.

TRAMP

You call those women, gawky, rawboned
creatures,

Thin-lipped, hard-jawed, cold-eyed! I like
fat women.

If you could walk just now down the Old
Kent Road,

And see the plump young girls in furs and
feathers,

With saucy black eyes, sparkling in the gas-
light;

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

And looking at you, munching oranges,
Or whispering to each other with shrill
giggles

As you go by, and nudging one another;
Or standing with a soldier eating winkles,
Grimacing with the vinegar and pepper,
Then laughing so merrily you almost wish
You were a red-coat, too! And the fat old
mothers,

Too old for feathers and follies, with their
tight

Nigh-bursting bodices, and their double chins,
They're homely, motherly and comfortable,
And do a man's eyes good. There's not a
sight

In all the world that's half as rare to see
As a fat old wife with jellied eels and
porter.

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

Ay, women should be plump . . . though

Ellen Ann

Was neither old nor fat, when she and I

Were walking out together, and she'd red
hair,

As red as blazes, and a peaked white face.

But 'twas her eyes, her eyes that always
laughed,

And the merry way she had with her . . .

But, Lord,

I'm talking! Only mention petticoats,

And I'm the boy to talk till dooms-
day. Women!

If it hadn't been for a petticoat, this moment
I might be drinking my own health in the
bar

Of The Seven Stars or The World Turned
Upside Down,

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

Instead of . . . Well, Old Cock, it's good to
have

Someone to talk to, after such a day.

You cannot get much further with a sheep;
And I met none but sheep, and they all scut-
tled,

Not even stopping to pass the time of
day,

And the birds, well, they'd enough to say,
and more,

When I was running away from myself in
the dark,

With their "Go back! Go back!"

DICK

You'd scared the grouse.
They talk like Christians. Often in the
dawn . . .

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

TRAMP

Bloodybush Edge! But why the Bloody-
bush?

I see no bush. . . .

DICK

Some fight in the old days, likely,
In the days when men were men . . .

TRAMP

I little thought,
When I set out from London on my travels,
That I was making straight for Bloodybush
Edge.

I had my reasons, but, reason or none, it's
certain

That I'd have turned up here, someday or
other:

For I must travel. I've the itching foot.

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

I talk of London, when I'm well out of it
By a hundred miles or so; but, when I'm in
it,

There always comes a time when I couldn't
stay

A moment longer, not for love or money:

Though in the end it always has me back.

I cannot rest. There's something in my
bones—

They'll need to screw the lid down with
brass screws

To keep them in my coffin. When I'm dead,
If I don't walk, I'll be surprised, I . . .

Lord,

We're on to ghosts again! But I'm the sort
That's always hankering to be elsewhere,

Wherever I am. Some men can stick to a
job

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

As though they liked it. I'm not made that
way.

I couldn't heave the same pick two days
running.

I've tried it: and I know. I must have
change.

It's in my blood. And work, why work's for
fools.

DICK

Ay, fools indeed: and yet they seem con-
tent.

Content! why my old uncle, Richard Dodd,
He worked till he was naught but skin and
bone,

And rheumatism: and when the doctor told
him:

"You must give up. It's no use; you're past
work."

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

“Past work,” he says, “past work, like an old horse:

“They shoot old nags, when they are past their work.

“Doctor,” he says, “I’ll give you five pound down

“To take that gun, and shoot me like a nag.”

The doctor only laughed, and answered, “Nay.

“An old nag’s carcase is worth money, Richard:

“But yours, why, who’d give anything for yours!”

They call me daft—Daft Dick. It pleases them.

But I have never been daft enough to work. I never did a hand’s turn in my life:

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

And won't, while there are trout-streams
left, and women.

And I am a traveller, too, I cannot rest.

The wind's in my bones, I think, and like
the wind,

I'm here, to-night; to-morrow, Lord knows
where!

TRAMP

London, perhaps, or well upon the road
there,

Since I'm on Bloodybush Edge.

DICK

Nay, never London.

I cannot thole the towns. They stifle me.

I spent a black day in Newcastle, once.

Never again! I cannot abide the crowds.

I must be by myself. I must have air:

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

I must have room to breathe, and elbow-
room,

Wide spaces round me, winds and running
water.

I know the singing-note of every burn
'Twixt here and High Cup Nick, by Appleby.
And birds and beasts, I must have them
about me.

Rabbits and hares, weasels and stoats and
adders,

Plover and grouse, partridge and snipe and
curlew,

Red-shank and heron. I think that towns
would choke me;

And I'd go blind shut in by the tall houses,
With never a far sight to stretch my eyes.

I must have hills, and hills beyond. And
beds—

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

I never held with beds and stuffiness.
I'm seldom at my ease beneath a roof:
The rafters all seem crushing on my head,
A dead weight. Though I sleep in barns in
 Winter,
I'm never at home except beneath the stars.
I've seen enough of towns; and as for the
 women,
Fat blowsy sluts and slatterns . . .

TRAMP

Easy, Old Cock!
“What's one man's meat . . .” as the saying
 is; and so,
Each man to his own world, and his own
 women.

*(They sit for awhile smoking in silence. Then DAFT
DICK begins singing softly to himself again.)*

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

DICK

(Singing) “Their horses were the wrong way
shod,

And Hobbie has mounted his grey sae fine,
Wat on his old horse, Jock on his bay;
And on they rode for the waters of Tyne.

“And when they came to Chollerton Ford,
They lighted down by the light o’ the moon;
And a tree they cut with nogs on each side,
To climb up the wa’ of Newcastle toun.”

TRAMP

What’s that you’re singing, matey?

DICK

“Jock o’ the Side.”

A ballad of the days when men were men,

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

And sheep were sheep, and not all mixer-
maxter.

Thon were brave days, or brave nights,
rather, thon!

Brave nights, when Liddisdale was Liddis-
dale,

And Tynedale, Tynedale, not all hand-in-
glove,

And hanky-panky, and naught but market-
haggling

Twixt men whose fathers' swords were the
bargainers!

That was a man's work, riding out, hot-trod,
Over the hills to lift a herd of cattle,

And leave behind a blazing byre, or to steal
Your neighbour's sheep, while he lay drunk
and snoring—

A man's work, ever bringing a man's wages,

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

The fight to the death, or life won at the
sword's point.

God! those were nights: the heather and sky
alow

With the light of burning peel-towers, and
the wind

Ringin' with slogans, as the dalesmen met,
Over the singing of the swords:

“An Armstrong! An Armstrong!”

“A Milburne! A Milburne!”

“An Elliott! An Elliott!”

“A Robson! A Robson!”

“A Charlton! A Charlton!”

“A Fenwick! A Fenwick!”

“Fy, Tynedale, to it!”

“Jethert's here! Jethert's here!”

“Tarsset and Tarretburn!

“Hardy and heatherbred!

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

“Yet! Yet!”

Man, did you ever hear the story told
Of Barty Milburne, Barty of the Comb,
Down Tarsset way? and how he waked one
morning

To find that overnight some Scottish reiver
Had lifted the pick of his flock: and how hot-
foot

He was up the Blackburn, summoning Cor-
bet Jock:

And how the two set out to track the thieves
By Emblehope, Berrymoor Edge and Black-
man’s Law,

By Blakehope Nick, and under Oh Me Edge,
And over Girdle Fell to Chattlehope Spout,
And so to Carter Bar; but lost the trail
Somewhere about the Reidswire: and how,
being loth

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

To go home empty-handed, they just lifted
The best sheep grazing on the Scottish side,
As fair exchange: and turned their faces
home.

By this, snow had set in: and 'twas sore
work

Driving the wethers against it over the fell;
When, finding they were followed in their
turn

By the laird of Leatham and his son, they
laughed,

And waited for the Scots by Chattlehope
Spout

Above Catcleugh: and in the snow they
fought,

Till Corbet Jock and one of the Scots were
killed,

And Barty himself sore wounded in the thigh;

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

When the other Scot, thinking him good as
dead,

Sprang on him, as he stooped, with a whick-
ering laugh:

And Barty, with one clean, back-handed
blow,

Struck off his head, and, as they tell the tale,
“Garred it spang like an onion along the
heather.”

Then, picking up the body of Corbet Jock,
He slung it over his shoulder; and carried his
mate

With wounded thigh, and driving the wethers
before him

Through blinding snow, across the boggy
fells

To the Blackburn, though his boot was filled
with blood.

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

Or the other tale, how one of the Robson
lads

Stole a Scot's ewes: and when he'd got them
home,

And had mixed them with his own, found
out, too late,

They'd got the scab: and how he went
straight back

With a stout hempen rope to the Scot's
house

And hanged him from his own rooftree by
the neck

Till he was dead, to teach the rascal a lesson,
Or so he said, that when a gentleman called
For sheep the next time, he'd think twice
about it

Before he tried to palm off scabbit ewes.

Poachers and housebreakers and bargainers!

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

Those men were men: and lived and died
like men;

Taking their own road—asking no man's
leave;

Doing and speaking outright, hot and clean,
The thing that burned in them, and paying
the price.

And those same gawky, rawboned women
mothered

Such sons as these; and still do, nowadays—
For hunting foxes, and for market-haggling!
You fear no living man! A glinting bullseye
Down a dark lane would not have set them
scuttling.

They didn't dread the mosshags in the dark.
And seemingly they'd little fear of ghosts,
Being themselves so free in making ghosts.
Ghosts! why the night is all alive with ghosts,

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

Ghosts of dead raiders, and dead cattle-
lifters;

Poor, headless ghosts; and ghosts with
broken necks . . .

See that chap, yonder, with the bleeding thigh,
On a grey gelding, making for Huckle-
winter—

A horse-thief, sure . . . And the ghostly
stallions whinney

As the ghostly reivers drive their flocks and
herds . . .

(Listening.)

They are quiet now: but I've often heard the
patter

Of sheep, or the trot-trot of the frightened
stirks

Down this same road . . .

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

TRAMP

Stop man! You'll drive me crazy!

Let's talk no more of ghosts! I want to sleep:
I'm dog-tired . . . but I'll never sleep to-
night.

What's that . . . I thought I heard . . .
I'm all a-tremble.

My very blood stops, listening, in my veins.
I'm all to fiddlestrings . . . Let's talk of
London,

And lights, and crowds, and women. Once I
met

A chap in the bar of The World Turned Up-
side Down,

With three blue snakes tattooed around his
wrist:

A joker, he was; and what he didn't know
Of women the world over you could shove

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

Between the nail and the quick, and never
feel it—

He told me that in Valparaiso once
A half-breed wench that he . . . but, Lord,
what's that!

*(A low distant sound of trotting drawing quickly
nearer.)*

I thought I heard . . . Do you hear nothing?

DICK

Naught.

TRAMP

I'm all on edge: I could have sworn I heard—
Where was I? Well, as I was saying . . .
God!

Can you hear nothing now? Trot-trot!
Trot-trot!

I must be going crazed, or you're stone deaf.

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

DICK

Nay, I'm none deaf.

TRAMP

It's coming nearer, nearer . . .
Trot-trot! trot-trot! Man, tell me that you
hear it,
For God's sake, or I'll go mad!

DICK

No two men ever
May hear or see them, together, at one time.

TRAMP

Hear what? See what? Speak, man, if you've
a tongue!

DICK

The ghostly stirks.

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

TRAMP

(Starting up.)

The ghostly stirks! Trot-trot!

Trot-trot! They're almost on us. Look
you! there!

Along the road there, black against the
sky.

They're charging down with eyes ablaze . . .

O Christ . . .

(He takes to his heels, running lamely down the road on the Scottish side, as a herd of frightened young stirks gallops down the road from the English side. They pass Dick, who watches them, placidly smoking, until they are by, when, taking his pipe from his mouth, he gives a blood-curdling whoop, which sends them scampering more wildly after the tramp. Presently the cattle-drover, panting and limping half-a-mile behind his herd, comes down the road. Seeing DICK, he stops.)

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

DROVER

Have any beasts come by? Lord, what a
dance

They've led me, since we quitted Belling-
ham!

I've chased them over half the countryside!

DICK

Aye: they were making straight for Din-
labyre.

DROVER

Then I can rest. They cannot go far wrong
now.

We're for Saughtree; and I'm fair hattered,
and they

Can't have the spunk left in them to stray
far.

They'll be all right.

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

DICK

Ay! and your brother's with them.

DROVER

Brother? I have no brother . . .

DICK

Well, he and you
Are as like as peas—a pair of gallows-birds.
And he was driving them, and walloping
them . . .

DROVER

(Starting to run.)

Good God! Just wait till I catch up with him!

DICK

(Calling after him.)

It will take you all your time and more, to
catch him.

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

(To himself.)

Now, I can sleep in peace, without bed-
fellows.

Two in a bed is one too many for me—
And such a clatter-jaw!

1913

HOOPS

SCENE: *The big tent-stable of a travelling circus.*

On the ground near the entrance, GENTLEMAN JOHN, stable-man and general odd-job man, lies smoking beside MERRY ANDREW, the clown. GENTLEMAN JOHN is a little hunched man with a sensitive face and dreamy eyes. MERRY ANDREW, who is resting between the afternoon and evening performances, with his clown's hat lying beside him, wears a crimson wig, and a baggy suit of orange-coloured cotton, patterned with purple cats. His face is chalked dead white and painted with a set grin, so that it is impossible to see what manner of man he is. In the background are camels and elephants feeding, dimly visible in the steamy dusk of the tent.

GENTLEMAN JOHN

And then consider camels: only think
Of camels long enough, and you'd go mad—

HOOPS

With all their humps and lumps; their
knobbly knees,

Splay feet and straddle legs; their sagging
necks,

Flat flanks, and scraggy tails, and monstrous
teeth.

I've not forgotten the first fiend I met,
'Twas in a lane in Smyrna, just a ditch
Between the shuttered houses, and so nar-
row

The brute's bulk blocked the road; the huge,
green stack

Of dewy fodder that it slouched beneath
Brushing the yellow walls on either hand,
And shutting out the strip of burning blue:
And I'd to face that vicious, bobbing head
With evil eyes, slack lips, and nightmare
teeth,

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

And duck beneath the snaky, squirming
neck,

Pranked with its silly string of bright blue
beads,

That seemed to wriggle every way at once,
As though it were a hydra. Allah's beard!

But I was scared and nearly turned and ran:

I felt that muzzle take me by the scruff

And heard those murderous teeth crunching
my spine,

Before I stooped—though I dodged safely
under.

I've always been afraid of ugliness.

I'm such a toad myself, I hate all toads;

And the camel is the ugliest toad of all

To my mind: and it's just my devil's luck

I've come to this—to be a camel's lackey,

To fetch and carry for original sin,

HOOPS

For sure enough, the camel's old evil incarnate.

Blue beads and amulets to ward off evil!
No eye's more evil than a camel's eye.
The elephant is quite a comely brute,
Compared with Satan camel,—trunk and all,
His floppy ears and his impertinent tail.
He's stolid, but, at least, a gentleman.
It doesn't hurt my pride to valet him,
And bring his shaving-water. He's a lord.
Only the bluest blood that has come down
Through generations from the mastodon
Could carry off that tail with dignity,
That tail and trunk. He cannot look absurd
For all the monkey tricks you put him
through,
Your paper hoops and popguns. He just
makes

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

His masters look ridiculous, when his pomp's
Butchered to make a bumpkins' holiday.

He's dignity itself, and proper pride,
That stands serenely in a circus-world
Of mountebanks and monkeys. He has
weight

Behind him: æons of primeval power
Have shaped that pillared bulk; and he
stands sure,

Solid, substantial on the world's foundations.
And he has form, form that's too big a thing
To be called beauty. Once long since, I
thought

To be a poet, and shape words, and mould
A poem like an elephant, huge, sublime,
To front oblivion: and because I failed
And all my rhymes were gawky, shambling
camels,

HOOPS

Or else obscene, blue-buttocked apes, I'm
doomed

To fetch and carry for the things I've made,
Till one of them crunches my back-bone
with his teeth,

Or knocks my wind out with a forthright
kick

Clean in the midriff; crumpling up in death
The hunched and stunted body that was me,
John, the apostle of the Perfect Form!

Jerusalem! I'm talking, like a book,
As you would say: and a bad book at that,
A maundering, kiss-mammy book—The
Hunchback's End,

Or The Camel-Keeper's Reward—would be
its title.

I froth and bubble like a new-broached cask.
No wonder you look glum for all your grin.

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

What makes you mope? You've naught to
growse about.

You've got no hump. Your body's brave
and straight—

So shapely even that you can afford
To trick it in fantastic shapelessness,
Knowing that there's a clean-limbed man
beneath

Preposterous pantaloons and purple cats.

I would have been a poet, if I could:

But better than shaping poems, 'twould
have been

To have had a comely body and clean limbs
Obedient to my bidding.

MERRY ANDREW

I missed a hoop
This afternoon.

HOOPS

GENTLEMAN JOHN

You missed a hoop? You mean . . .

MERRY ANDREW

That I am done, used up, scrapped, on the
shelf,

Out of the running,—only that, no more.

GENTLEMAN JOHN

Well, I've been missing hoops my whole life
long;

Though, when I come to think of it, perhaps

There's little consolation to be chewed

From crumbs that I can offer.

MERRY ANDREW

I've not missed

A hoop since I was six. I'm forty-two.

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

This is the first time that my body's failed
me:

But 'twill not be the last. And . . .

GENTLEMAN JOHN

Such is life!

You're going to say. You see I've got it pat,
Your jaded wheeze. Lord, what a wit I'd
make

If I'd a set grin painted on my face.
And such is life, I'd say a hundred times,
And each time set the world aroar afresh
At my original humour. Missed a hoop!
Why, man alive, you've naught to grumble
at.

I've boggled every hoop since I was six.
I'm fifty-five; and I've run round a ring
Would make this potty circus seem a pinhole.

HOOPS

I wasn't born to sawdust. I'd the world
For circus . . .

MERRY ANDREW

It's no time for crowing now.
I know a gentleman, and take on trust
The silver spoon and all. My teeth were cut
Upon a horseshoe: and I wasn't born
To purple and fine linen—but to sawdust,
To sawdust, as you say—brought up on
sawdust.

I've had to make my daily bread of sawdust:
Ay, and my children's—children's, that's the
rub,

As Shakespeare says . . .

GENTLEMAN JOHN

Ah, there you go again!
What a rare wit to set the ring aroar—

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

As Shakespeare says! Crowing? A gentleman? .

Man, didn't you say you'd never missed a hoop?

It's only gentlemen who miss no hoops,
Clean-livers, easy lords of life who take
Each obstacle at a leap, who never fail.
You are the gentleman.

MERRY ANDREW

Now don't you try
Being funny at my expense; or you'll soon
find

I'm not quite done for yet—not quite snuffed
out.

There's still a spark of life. You may have
words:

But I've a fist will be a match for them.

HOOPS

Words slaver feebly from a broken jaw.
I've always lived straight, as a man must do
In my profession, if he'd keep in fettle:
But I'm no gentleman, for I fail to see
There's any sport in baiting a poor man
Because he's losing grip at forty-two,
And sees his livelihood slipping from his
grasp—
Ay, and his children's bread.

GENTLEMAN JOHN

Why, man alive,
Who's baiting you? This winded, broken
cur,
That limps through life, to bait a bull like
you!
You don't want pity, man? The beaten bull,
Even when the dogs are tearing at his gullet,

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

Turns no eye up for pity. I, myself,
Crippled and hunched and twisted as I am,
Would make a brave fend to stand up to
 you
Until you swallowed your words, if you
 should slobber
Your pity over me. A bull! Nay, man,
You're nothing but a bear with a sore head.
A bee has stung you—you who've lived on
 honey.
Sawdust, forsooth! You've had the sweet of
 life:
You've munched the honeycomb till . . .

MERRY ANDREW

Ay: talk's cheap.
But you've no children. You don't under-
 stand.

HOOPS

GENTLEMAN JOHN

I have no children: I don't understand!

MERRY ANDREW

It's children make the difference.

GENTLEMAN JOHN

Man alive—

Alive and kicking, though you're shamming
dead—

You've hit the truth at last. It's that, just
that,

Makes all the difference. If you hadn't chil-
dren,

I'd find it in my heart to pity you,

Granted you'd let me. I don't understand!

I've seen you stripped. I've seen your chil-
dren stripped.

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

You've never seen me naked; but you can
guess

The misstitched, gnarled, and crooked thing
I am.

Now, do you understand? I may have words:
But you; man, do you never burn with pride
That you've begotten those six limber bodies,
Firm flesh, and supple sinew, and lithe
limb—

Six nimble lads, each like young Absalom,
With red blood running lively in his veins,
Bone of your bone, your very flesh and
blood?

It's you don't understand: God, what I'd
give

This moment to be you, just as you are,
Preposterous pantaloons, and purple cats,
And painted leer, and crimson curls, and all,

HOOPS

To be you now, with only one missed hoop,
If I'd six clean-limbed children of my loins,
Born of the ecstasy of life within me,
To keep it quick and valiant in the ring
When I . . . but I . . . Man, man, you've
missed a hoop:

But they'll take every hoop like blooded
colts:

And 'twill be you in them that leaps through
life,

And in their children, and their children's
children.

God! doesn't it make you hold your breath
to think

There'll always be an Andrew in the ring,
The very spit and image of you stripped,
While life's old circus lasts? And I . . . at
least,

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

There is no twisted thing of my begetting
To keep my shame alive: and that's the most
That I've to pride myself upon. But, God,
I'm proud, ay, proud as Lucifer, of that.
Think what it means, with all the urge and
 sting,
When such a lust of life runs in the veins.
You, with your six sons, and your one missed
 hoop,
Put that thought in your pipe and smoke it.
 Well,
And how d'you like the flavour? Something
 bitter?
And burns the tongue a trifle? That's the
 brand
That I must smoke while I've the breath to
 puff.

(Pause.)

HOOPS

I've always worshipped the body, all my
life—

The body, quick with the perfect health
which is beauty,

Lively, lissom, alert, and taking its way
Through the world with the easy gait of the
early gods.

The only moments I've lived my life to the full
And that live again in remembrance unfaded
are those

When I've seen life compact in some perfect
body,

The living God made manifest in man:

A diver in the Mediterranean, resting,

With sleeked black hair, and glistening salt-
tanned skin,

Gripping the quivering gunwale with tense
hands,

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

His torso lifted out of the peacock sea,
Like Neptune, carved in amber, come to
life:

A stark Egyptian on the Nile's edge poised
Like a bronze Osiris against the lush, rank
green:

A fisherman dancing reels, on New Year's
Eve,

In a hall of shadowy rafters and flickering
lights,

At St. Abbs on the Berwickshire coast, to
the skirl of the pipes,

The lift of the wave in his heels, the sea in
his veins:

A Cherokee Indian, as though he were one
with his horse,

His coppery shoulders agleam, his feathers
afame

HOOPS

With the last of the sun, descending a gulch
in Alaska:

A brawny Cleveland puddler, stripped to the
loins,

On the cauldron's brink, stirring the molten
iron

In the white-hot glow, a man of white-hot
metal:

A Cornish ploughboy driving an easy share
Through the grey, light soil of a headland,
against a sea

Of sapphire, gay in his new white cordu-
roys,

Blue-eyed, dark-haired and whistling a care-
less tune:

Jack Johnson, stripped for the ring, in his
swarthy pride

Of sleek and rippling muscle . . .

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

MERRY ANDREW

Jack's the boy!

Ay, he's the proper figure of a man
But he'll grow fat and flabby and scant of
breath.
He'll miss his hoop some day.

GENTLEMAN JOHN

But what are words
To shape the joy of form? The Greeks did
best
To cut in marble or to cast in bronze
Their ecstasy of living. I remember
A marvellous Hermes that I saw in Athens,
Fished from the very bottom of the deep
Where he had lain, two thousand years or
more,
Wrecked with a galley-full of Roman pirates,

HOOPS

Among the white bones of his plunderers
Whose flesh had fed the fishes as they sank,—
Serene in cold imperishable beauty,
Biding his time, till he should rise again,
Exultant from the wave, for all men's wor-
ship,

The morning-spring of life, the youth of the
world,

Shaped in sea-coloured bronze for everlast-
ing.

Ay, the Greeks knew; but men have for-
gotten now.

Not easily do we meet beauty walking
The world to-day in all the body's pride.
That's why I'm here—a stable-boy to
camels—

For in the circus-ring there's more delight
Of seemly bodies, goodly in sheer health,

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

Bodies trained and tuned to the perfect
pitch,

Eager, blithe, debonair, from head to heel
Aglow and alive in every pulse, than else-
where

In this machine-ridden land of grimy, glum,
Round-shouldered, coughing mechanics. Once
I lived

In London, in a slum called Paradise,
Sickened to see the greasy pavements crawl-
ing

With puny, flabby babies, thick as maggots.
Poor brats! I'd soon go mad, if I'd to live
In London, with its stunted men and women
But little better to look on than myself.

Yet, there's an island where the men keep
fit—

HOOPS

St. Kilda's, a stark fastness of high crag:
They must keep fit or famish; their main
 food
The Solan goose; and it's a chancy job
To climb down a sheer face of slippery gran-
 ite
And drop a noose over the sentinel bird
Ere he can squawk to rouse the sleeping
 flock.
They must keep fit—their bodies taut and
 trim —
To have the nerve: and they're like tempered
 steel,
Suppled and fined. But even they've grown
 slacker
Through traffic with the mainland, in these
 days.
A hundred years ago, the custom held

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

That none should take a wife till he had
stood,
His left heel on the dizziest point of crag,
His right leg and both arms, stretched in mid
air,
Above the sea: three hundred feet to
drop
To death, if he should fail—a Spartan
test.
But any man who could have failed, would
scarce
Have earned his livelihood, or his children's
bread
On that bleak rock.

MERRY ANDREW

(Drowsily.)

Ay, children—that's it, children!

HOOPS

GENTLEMAN JOHN

St. Kilda's children had a chance, at least,
With none begotten idly of weakling fathers.

Spartan test for fatherhood! Should they
miss

Their hoop, 'twas death, and childless. You
have still

Six lives to take unending hoops for you,
And you yourself are not done yet . . .

MERRY ANDREW

(More drowsily.)

Not yet:

And there's much comfort in the thought of
children.

They're bonnie boys enough; and should do
well,

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

If I can but keep going a little while,
A little longer till . . .

GENTLEMAN JOHN

Six strapping sons!
And I have naught but camels.

(Pause.)

Yet, I've seen
A vision in this stable that puts to shame
Each ecstasy of mortal flesh and blood
That's been my eyes' delight. I never
breathed
A word of it to man or woman yet:
I couldn't whisper it now to you, if you
looked
Like any human thing this side of death.
'Twas on the night I stumbled on the circus.
I'd wandered all day, lost among the fells,

HOOPS

Over snow-smothered hills, through blinding
 blizzard,
Whipped by a wind that seemed to strip and
 skin me,
Till I was one numb ache of sodden ice.
Quite done, and drunk with cold, I'd soon
 have dropped
Dead in a ditch; when suddenly a lantern
Dazzled my eyes. I smelt a queer warm smell;
And felt a hot puff in my face; and blun-
 dered
Out of the flurry of snow and raking wind
Dizzily into a glowing Arabian night
Of elephants and camels having supper.
I thought that I'd gone mad, stark, staring
 mad:
But I was much too sleepy to mind just
 then—

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

Dropped dead asleep upon a truss of hay;
And lay, a log, till—well, I cannot tell
How long I lay unconscious. I but know
I slept, and wakened: and that 't was no
dream.

I heard a rustle in the hay beside me;
And opening sleepy eyes, scarce marvelling,
I saw her, standing naked in the lamp-
light,

Beneath the huge tent's cavernous canopy,
Against the throng of elephants and camels
That champed unwondering in the golden
dusk,

Moon-white Diana, mettled Artemis—
Her body, quick and tense as her own bow-
string—

Her spirit, an arrow barbed and strung for
flight—

HOOPS

White snow-flakes melting on her night-black
hair,

And on her glistening breasts and supple
thighs:

Her red lips parted, her keen eyes alive
With fierce, far-ranging hungers of the
chase

Over the hills of morn . . . The lantern
guttered:

And I was left alone in the outer darkness
Among the champing elephants and camels.
And I'll be a camel-keeper to the end:
Though never again my eyes . . .

(Pause.)

So, you can sleep,
You merry Andrew, for all you missed your
hoop.

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

It's just as well, perhaps. Now I can hold
My secret to the end. Ah, here they come!

*(Six lads, between the ages of three and twelve, clad
in pink tights covered with silver spangles,
tumble into the tent.)*

THE ELDEST BOY

Daddy, the bell's rung, and . . .

GENTLEMAN JOHN

He's snoozing sound.

(To the youngest boy.)

You just creep quietly, and take tight hold
Of the crimson curls, and tug, and you will
hear

The purple pussies all caterwaul at once.

1914

THOROUGHFARES

TO EDWARD MARSH

SOLWAY FORD

He greets you with a smile from friendly
eyes;

But never speaks, nor rises from his bed:
Beneath the green night of the sea he lies,
The whole world's waters weighing on his
head.

The empty wain made slowly over the sand;
And he, with hands in pockets by the side
Was trudging, deep in dream, the while he
scanned

With blue, unseeing eyes the far-off tide:
When, stumbling in a hole, with startled
neigh,

His young horse reared; and, snatching at
the rein,

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

He slipped: the wheels crushed on him as he
lay;

Then, tilting over him, the lumbering wain
Turned turtle as the plunging beast broke free,
And made for home: and pinioned and half-
dead

He lay, and listened to the far-off sea;
And seemed to hear it surging overhead
Already; though 'twas full an hour or more
Until high-tide, when Solway's shining flood
Should sweep the shallow firth from shore
to shore.

He felt a salty tingle in his blood;
And seemed to stifle, drowning. Then again,
He knew that he must lie a lingering while
Before the sea might close above his pain,
Although the advancing waves had scarce a
mile

SOLWAY FORD

To travel, creeping nearer, inch by inch,
With little runs and sallies over the sand.
Cooped in the dark, he felt his body flinch
From each chill wave as it drew nearer
hand.

He saw the froth of each oncoming crest;
And felt the tugging of the ebb and flow,
And waves already breaking over his breast;
Though still far-off they murmured, faint
and low;

Yet, creeping nearer, inch by inch; and now
He felt the cold drench of the drowning
wave,

And the salt cold of death on lips and brow;
And sank, and sank . . . while still, as in a
grave,

In the close dark beneath the crushing cart,
He lay, and listened to the far-off sea.

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

Wave after wave was knocking at his heart,
And swishing, swishing, swishing cease-
lessly

About the wain—cool waves that never
reached

His cracking lips, to slake his hell-hot
thirst . . .

Shrill in his ear a startled barn-owl
screeched . . .

He smelt the smell of oil-cake . . . when
there burst,

Through the big barn's wide-open door, the
sea—

The whole sea sweeping on him with a
roar . . .

He clutched a falling rafter, dizzily . . .

Then sank through drowning deeps, to rise
no more.

SOLWAY FORD

Down, ever down, a hundred years he sank
Through cold green death, ten thousand
fathom deep.

His fiery lips deep draughts of cold sea drank
That filled his body with strange icy sleep,
Until he felt no longer that numb ache,
The dead-weight lifted from his legs at last:
And yet, he gazed with wondering eyes awake
Up the green glassy gloom through which he
passed:

And saw, far overhead, the keels of ships
Grow small and smaller, dwindling out of
sight;

And watched the bubbles rising from his
lips;

And silver salmon swimming in green night;
And queer big, golden bream with scarlet fins
And emerald eyes and fiery-flashing tails;

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

Enormous eels with purple-spotted skins;
And mammoth unknown fish with sapphire
scales

That bore down on him with red jaws agape,
Like yawning furnaces of blinding heat;
And when it seemed to him as though escape
From those hell-mouths were hopeless, his
bare feet

Touched bottom: and he lay down in his place
Among the dreamless legion of the drowned,
The calm of deeps unsounded on his face,
And calm within his heart; while all around
Upon the midmost ocean's crystal floor
The naked bodies of dead seamen lay,
Dropped, sheer and clean, from hubbub,
brawl and roar,
To peace, too deep for any tide to sway.

.

SOLWAY FORD

The little waves were lapping round the cart
Already, when they rescued him from death.
Life cannot touch the quiet of his heart
To joy or sorrow, as, with easy breath,
And smiling lips upon his back he lies,
And never speaks, nor rises from his bed;
Gazing through those green glooms with
 happy eyes,
While gold and sapphire fish swim overhead.

A CATCH FOR SINGING

Said the Old Young Man to the Young Old
Man:

“Alack, and well-a-day!”

Said the Young Old Man to the Old Young
Man:

“The cherry-tree’s in flourish!”

Said the Old Young Man to the Young Old
Man:

“The world is growing grey.”

Said the Young Old Man to the Old Young
Man:

“The cherry-tree’s in flourish!”

Said the Old Young Man to the Young Old
Man:

“Both flower and fruit decay.”

A CATCH FOR SINGING

Said the Young Old Man to the Old Young
Man:

“The cherry-tree’s in flourish!”

Said the Old Young Man to the Young Old
Man:

“Alack, and well-a-day!

The world is growing grey:

And flower and fruit decay.

Beware Old Man, beware Old Man!

For the end of life is nearing;

And the grave yawns by the way . . .”

Said the Young Old Man to the Old Young
Man:

“I’m a trifle hard of hearing;

And can’t catch a word you say . . .

But the cherry-tree’s in flourish!”

GERANIUMS

Stuck in a bottle on the window-sill,
In the cold gaslight burning gaily red
Against the luminous blue of London night,
These flowers are mine: while somewhere out
 of sight

In some black-throated alley's stench and
 heat,

Oblivious of the racket of the street,
A poor old weary woman lies in bed.

Broken with lust and drink, blear-eyed and
 ill,

Her battered bonnet nodding on her head,
From a dark arch she clutched my sleeve
 and said:

GERANIUMS

“I’ve sold no bunch to-day, nor touched a
bite . . .

Son, buy six-penn’orth; and ’t will mean a
bed.”

So, blazing gaily red
Against the luminous deeps
Of starless London night,
They burn for my delight:
While somewhere, snug in bed,
A worn old woman sleeps.

And yet to-morrow will these blooms be
dead
With all their lively beauty; and to-morrow
May end the light lusts and the heavy sor-
row
Of that old body with the nodding head.

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

The last oath muttered, the last pint drained
 deep,
She'll sink, as Cleopatra sank, to sleep;
Nor need to barter blossoms for a bed.

THE WHISPERERS

THE WHISPERERS

As beneath the moon I walked,
Dog-at-heel my shadow stalked,
Keeping ghostly company:
And as we went gallantly
Down the fell-road, dusty-white,
Round us in the windy night
Bracken, rushes, bent and heather
Whispered ceaselessly together:
“Would he ever journey more,
Ever stride so carelessly,
If he knew what lies before,
And could see what we can see?”

As I listened, cold with dread,
Every hair upon my head
Strained to hear them talk of me,

Whispering, whispering ceaselessly:
“Folly’s fool the man must be,
Surely, since, though where he goes
He knows not, his shadow knows:
And his secret shadow never
Utters warning words, or ever
Seeks to save him from his fate,
Reckless, blindfold, and unknown,
Till death tells him all, too late,
And his shadow walks alone.”

MABEL

MABEL

When Nigger Dick and Hell-for-Women
slouched

Into the taproom of the "Duck and De'il,"
The three Dalmatian pups slunk in at heel
And down among the slushy saw-dust
crouched;

But Mabel would not leave the windy street
For any gaudy tavern's reek and heat—
Not she! for Mabel was no spotted dog
To crawl among the steaming muddy feet
Beneath a bench, and slumber like a log.

And so she set her hoofs, and stayed outside,
Though Hell-for-Women pushed the swing-
door wide,

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

And "Mabel, darling! Mabel, darling!" cried,
And Nigger Dick thrust out his head and
cursed

Until his tongue burned with so hot a thirst,
He turned and swore that he'd not split his
throat

To save the soul of any giddy goat.

And then they left her, stubborn, wild and
white,

Snuffing the wet air of the windy night:

And as she stood beneath a cold blue star
That pierced the narrow strip of midnight sky
Between the sleeping houses black and high,
The glare and glitter of the reeking bar,
And all the filth and squalor of the street
Were blotted out . . .

and she was lost between

MABEL

The beetling crags of some deep, dark ra-
vine

In Andalusian solitudes of stone,

A trembling, young, bewildered nanny-goat

Within the cold blue heart of night alone . . .

Until her ears pricked, tingling to a bleat,

As, far above her, on a naked scar,

The dews of morning dripping from his
beard,

Rejoicing in his strength the herd-king
reared,

Shaking the darkness from his shaggy coat.

THE VIXEN

The vixen made for Deadman's Flow,
Where not a mare but mine could go;
And three hounds only splashed across
The quaking hags of mile-wide moss;
Only three of the deadbeat pack
Scrambled out by Lone Maid's Slack,
Bolter, Tough, and Ne'er-Die-Nell:
But as they broke across the fell
The tongue they gave was good to hear,
Lively music, clean and clear,
Such as only light-coats make,
Hot-trod through the girth-deep brake.

The vixen, draggled and nigh-spent,
Twisted through the rimy bent

THE VIXEN

Towards the Christhope Craggs. I thought
Every earth stopt—winded—caught . . .
She's a mask and brush! When white
A squall of snow swept all from sight;
And hoodman-blind, Lightfoot and I
Battled with the roaring sky.

When southerly the snow had swept,
Light broke, as the vixen crept
Slinking up the stony brae.
On a jutting scar she lay,
Panting, lathered, while she eyed
The hounds that took the stiff brae-side
With yelping music, mad to kill.

Then vixen, hounds and craggy hill
Were smothered in a blinding swirl:
And when it passed, there stood a girl

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

Where the vixen late had lain,
Smiling down, as I drew rein,
Baffled; and the hounds, deadbeat,
Fawning at the young girl's feet,
Whimpered, cowed, where her red hair,
Streaming to her ankles bare,
Turned as white among the heather
As the vixen's brush's feather.

Flinching on my flinching mare,
I watched her, gaping and astare,
As she smiled with red lips wide,
White fangs curving either side
Of her lolling tongue . . . My thrapple
Felt fear's fang: I strove, agrapple,
Reeling . . . and again blind snow
Closed like night.

No man may know

THE VIXEN

How Lightfoot won through Deadman's Flow
And naught I knew till, in the glow
Of home's wide door, my wife's kind face
Smiled welcome. And for me the chase,
The last chase, ended. Though the pack
Through the blizzard struggled back,
Gone were Bolter, Tough and Nell,
Where, the vixen's self can tell!
Long we sought them, high and low,
By Christhope Crag and Deadman's Flow,
By slack and syke and hag: and found
Never bone nor hair of hound.

THE LODGING HOUSE

When up the fretful, creaking stair,
From floor to floor
I creep
On tiptoe, lest I wake from their first beauty-
sleep
The unknown lodgers lying, layer on layer,
In the packed house from roof to basement
Behind each landing's unseen door;
The well-known steps are strangely steep,
And the old stairway seems to soar,
For my amazement
Hung in air,
Flight on flight
Through pitchy night,
Evermore and evermore.

THE LODGING HOUSE

And when at last I stand outside
My garret-door I hardly dare
To open it,
Lest, when I fling it wide,
With candle lit
And reading in my only chair,
I find myself already there . . .

And so must crawl back down the sheer
 black pit
Of hell's own stair,
Past lodgers sleeping layer on layer,
To seek a home I know not where.

THE ICE

Her day out from the workhouse-ward, she
stands,

A grey-haired woman, decent and precise,
With prim black bonnet and neat paisley
shawl,

Among the other children by the stall;
And with grave relish eats a penny ice.

To wizened toothless gums, with quaking
hands

She holds it, shuddering with delicious cold;
Nor heeds the jeering laughter of young men—
The happiest, in her innocence, of all:
For, while their insolent youth must soon
grow old,

She, who's been old, is now a child again.

WOOLGATHERING

WOOLGATHERING

Youth that goes woolgathering,
Mooning and stargazing,
Always finding everything
Full of fresh amazing,
Best will meet the moment's need
When the dream brings forth the deed.

He who keeps through all his days
Open eyes of wonder
Is the lord of skiey ways,
And the earth thereunder:
For the heart to do and sing
Comes of youth's woolgathering.

THE TRAM

Humming and creaking, the car down the
street

Lumbered and lurched through thunderous
gloom

Bearing us, spent and dumb with the heat,
From office and counter and factory home:

Sallow-faced clerks, genteel in black;
Girls from the laundries, draggled and dank;
Ruddy-faced labourers slouching slack;
A broken actor, grizzled and lank;

A mother with querulous babe on her lap;
A schoolboy whistling under his breath;
An old man crouched in a dreamless nap;
A widow with eyes on the eyes of death;

THE TRAM

A priest; a sailor with deepsea gaze;
A soldier in scarlet with waxed moustache;
A drunken trollop in velvet and lace;
All silent in that tense dusk . . . when a
flash

Of lightning shivered the sultry gloom:
With shattering brattle the whole sky fell
About us, and rapt to a dazzling doom
We glided on in a timeless spell,

Unscathed through deluge and flying fire
In a magical chariot of streaming glass,
Cut off from our kind and the world's desire,
Made one by the awe that had come to pass.

ON THE EMBANKMENT

Down on the sunlit ebb, with the wind in her
sails, and free
Of cable and anchor, she swept rejoicing to
seek the sea.

And my eyes and my heart swept out with
her,
When at my elbow I felt a stir;
And glancing down, I saw a lad—
A shambling lad with shifty air,
Weak-chested, stunted and ill-clad,
Who watched her with unseeing stare.

Dull, watery grey eyes he had
Blinking beneath the slouching cap

ON THE EMBANKMENT

That hid the low-browed, close-cropped head:
And as I turned to him he said
With hopeless hangdog air:
“Just out of gaol three days ago;
And I’ll be back before I know:
For nothing else is left a chap
When once he’s been inside . . . and
so . . .”

Then dumb he stood with sightless stare
Set on the sunlit, windy sail of the far-off
boat that free
Of cable and anchor still swept on rejoicing
to seek the sea.

My heart is a sunlit, windy sail:
My heart is a hopeless lad in gaol.

THE DANCERS

'Neath a thorn as white as snow,
High above the peacock sea,
Hither, thither, to and fro,
Merrily the grey rats go:
To the song of ebb and flow
Moving as to melody.

Over gnarled roots, high and low,
Twisting, frisking fearlessly,
Six young hearts that needs must know,
When the ragged thorn's in blow,
Spring, and Spring's desire, and so
Dance, above the dancing sea.

THE WIND

THE WIND

To the lean, clean land, to the last cold
height,
You shall come with a whickering breath,
From the depths of despair or the depths of
delight,
Stript stark to the wind of death.

And whether you're sinless, or whether you've
sinned,
It's useless to whimper and whine;
For the lean, clean blade of the cut-throat
wind
Will slit your weasand, and mine.

THE VINDICTIVE STAIRCASE

OR

THE REWARD OF INDUSTRY

In a doomed and empty house in Hounds-
ditch

All night long I lie awake and listen,
While all night the ghost of Mrs. Murphy
Tiptoes up and down the wheezy staircase,
Sweeling ghostly grease of quaking candles.

Mrs. Murphy, timidest of spectres,
You who were the cheeriest of charers,
With the heart of innocence and only
Torn between a zest for priests and porter,
Mrs. Murphy of the ample bosom,—
Suckler of a score or so of children

THE VINDICTIVE STAIRCASE

(“Children? Bless you! Why, I’ve buried
six, Sir.”)

Who in forty years wore out three hus-
bands

And one everlasting, shameless bonnet
Which I’ve little doubt was confined with
you—

Mrs. Murphy, wherefor do you wander,
Sweeling ghostly grease of quaking candles,
Up and down the stairs you scrubbed so
sorely,
Scrubbed till they were naked, dank, and
aching?

Now that you are dead, is this their ven-
geance?

Recollecting all you made them suffer
With your bristled brush and soapy water

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

When you scrubbed them naked, dank and
aching,
Have they power to hold your ghostly foot-
steps
Chained as to an everlasting treadmill?

Mrs. Murphy, think you 't would appease them
If I rose now in my shivering nightshirt,
Rose and told them how you, too, had suf-
fered—
You, their seeming tyrant, but their bond-
slave—
Toiling uncomplaining in their service,
Till your knuckles and your knees were
knotted
Into writhing fires of red rheumatics,
And how, in the end, 't was they who killed
you?

THE VINDICTIVE STAIRCASE

Even should their knots still harden to you,
Bow your one and all-enduring bonnet
Till your ear is level with my keyhole,
While I whisper ghostly consolation:
Know this house is marked out for the
 spoiler,
Doomed to fall to Hobnails with his pickaxe;
And its crazy staircase chopped to firewood,
Splintered, bundled, burned to smoke and
 ashes,
Soon shall perish, scattered to the fourwinds.
Then, God rest your spirit, Mrs. Murphy!

Yet, who knows! A staircase . . . Mrs.
 Murphy,
God forbid that you be doomed to tiptoe
Through eternity, a timid spectre,
Sweeling ghostly grease of quaking candles,

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

Up and down the spectre of a staircase,
While all night I lie awake and listen
In a damned and ghostly house in Hounds-
ditch!

RAGAMUFFINS

RAGAMUFFINS

Few folk like the wind's way;
Fewer folk like mine,—
Folk who rise at nine,
Who live to drudge and dine,
Who never see the starry light,
And sleep in the same bed each night
Under the same roof;
When the rascal wind and I
Happen to be gadding by,
Gentlefolk, so fat and fine
Beg to hold aloof,
Leaving us to starlit beds, and husks amid
the swine.

Few folk like the wind's song,
And fewer folk like mine,—

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

Folk who trudge the trodden way,
Who keep the track and never stray,
Who think the sun's for making hay,—
Folk who cannot dance or play,
Faultless folk and fine.
Yet, the wind and I are gay,
In our ragamuffin way,
Singing, storm or shine.

THE ALARUM

THE ALARUM

Stark to the skin, I crawled a knife-edged
blade
Of melting ice above the pit of Hell,
Flame-licked and scorched; yet strangely un-
dismayed,
Till on my ears a dizzy clamour fell,
And dropt me sheer . . . and, wakening in
my bed,
I saw the sky, beyond the chimneys red
And heard the crazy clanging of a bell.

IN A RESTAURANT

He wears a red rose in his buttonhole,
A city-clerk on Sunday dining out:
And as the music surges over the din
The heady quavering of the violin
Sings through his blood, and puts old cares
 to rout,
And tingles, quickening, through his shrunken
 soul,

Till he forgets his ledgers, and the prim
Black, crabbèd figures, and the qualmy smell
Of ink and musty leather and leadglaze,
As, in eternities of Summer days,
He dives through shivering waves, or rides
 the swell
On rose-red seas of melody aswim.

THE GREETING

THE GREETING

“What fettle, mate?” to me he said
As he went by
With lifted head
And laughing eye,
Where, black against the dawning red,
The pit-heaps cut the sky:
“What fettle, mate?”

“What fettle, mate?” to him I said,
As he went by
With shrouded head
And darkened eye,
Borne homeward by his marrows, dead
Beneath the noonday sky:
“What fettle, mate?”

WHEELS

To safety of the curb he thrust the crone:
When a shaft took him in the back, and prone
He tumbled heavily, but all unheard
Amid the scurry of wheels that crashed and
 whirred
About his senseless head—his helmet crushed
Like crumpled paper by a car that rushed
Upon him unaware. And as he lay
He heard again the wheels he'd heard all day
About him on point-duty . . . only now
Each red-hot wheel ran searing over his
 brow—
A sizzling star with hub and spokes and tyre
One monstrous Catherine-wheel of sparking
 fire

WHEELS

Whirring down windy tunnels of the
night . . .

That Catherine-wheel, somehow it will not
light—

Fixed to the broken paling; and the pin
Pricks the boy's finger as he jabs it in:

He sucks the salty blood—the spiteful thing
Fires, whizzing, sputtering sparks: he feels
them sting

His wincing cheek; and, on the damp night-
air,

The stench of burnt saltpetre and singed
hair . . .

While still he lies and listens without fear
To the loud traffic rumbling in his ear—
Wheels rumbling in his ear, and through his
brain

For evermore, a never-ending train

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

Of scarlet postal-vans that whirl one red
Perpetual hot procession through his head—
His head that's just a clanking, clattering
mill

Of grinding wheels . . . and down an endless
hill

After his hoop he runs, a little lad,
Barefooted 'neath the stars, in nightshirt
clad—

And stumbles into bed, the stars all gone
Though in his head the hoop keeps running
on

And on and on: his head grown big and wide
Holds all the windy night and stars in-
side . . .

And still within a hair's breadth of his ear
The crunch and gride of wheels rings sharp
and clear—

WHEELS

Huge lumbering wagons, crusted axle-deep
With country marl, their drivers half-asleep
Against green toppling mounds of cab-
bages

Still crisp with dewy airs, or stacks of
cheese

Smelling of Arcady, till all the sky'
In clouds of cheese and cabbages rolls by—
Great golden cheeses wheeling through the
night,

And giant cabbages of emerald light
That tumble after, scattering crystal drops . . .
While in his ear the grinding never stops—
Wheels grinding asphalt . . . then a high-
piled wain

Of mignonette in boxes . . . and again,
A baby at his father's cottage-door
He toddles, treading on his pinafore,

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

And tumbles headlong in a bed of bloom,
Half-smothered in the deep, sweet honeyed
 gloom
Of crushed, wet blossom, and the hum of
 bees—
Big bumble-bees that buzz through flowery
 trees—
Grows furious . . . changing to a roar of
 wheels
And honk of hooting horns: and now he
 feels
That all the cars in London filled with
 light
Are bearing down upon him through the
 night,
As out of hall and theatre there pour
White-shouldered women, ever more and
 more,

WHEELS

Bright-eyed, with flashing teeth, borne in a
throng

Of purring, glittering cars, ten thousand
strong:

Each drowsy dame, and eager chattering lass
Laughing unheard within her box of glass . . .

And then great darkness, and a clanging bell—

Clanging beneath the hollow dome of hell

Aglow like burnished copper; and a roar

Of wheels and wheels and wheels for ever-
more,

As engine after engine crashes by

With clank and rattle under that red sky

Dropping a trail of burning coals behind,

That scorch his eyeballs till he lies half-blind,

Smouldering to cinder in a vasty night

Of wheeling worlds and stars in whirring
flight,

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

And suns that blaze in thunderous fury on
For ever and for ever, yet are gone
Ere he can gasp to see them . . . head to
heels

Slung round a monstrous red-hot hub, that
wheels

Across infinity, with spokes of fire
That dwindle slowly till the shrinking tyre
Is clamped like aching ice about his head . . .

He smells clean acid smells: and safe in bed
He wakens in a lime-washed ward, to hear
Somebody moaning almost in his ear,
And knows that it's himself that moans: and
then,

Battling his way back to the world of men,
He sees with leaden eyelids opening wide,
His young wife gravely knitting by his side.

PROMETHEUS

PROMETHEUS

All day beneath the bleak, indifferent skies,
Broken and blind, a shivering bag of bones,
He trudges over icy paving stones,
And “Matches! Matches! Matches!
Matches!” cries.

And now beneath the dismal, dripping night
And shadowed by a deeper night, he stands:
And yet he holds within his palsied hands
Quick fire enough to set his world alight.

NIGHT

Suddenly kindling the skylight's pitchy
square,

The eyes of a cat, sinister, glassy and green,
Caught by a trick of the light in a senseless
stare . . .

And the powers of the older night, abhorrent,
obscene,

Each from his den of darkness and loathly
lair,

Slink to my bedside, and gibber and mow,
and fill

My heart with the Fear of the Fen and the
Dread of the Hill

And the Terror that stalks by night through
the Wood of Doom.

NIGHT

And things that are headless and nameless
throng the room:

The cold webbed fingers of witches are in
my hair:

The clammy lips of the warlock are clenched
to mine:

The Eel of the bottomless pit of Deadman's
Bog

Slithers an icy spiral about my spine:

A corpse-clutch freezes my midriff, the foul
reek of Fog . . .

When my hand is licked by the warm wet
tongue of my dog;

The eyes blink out; and Horror slinks back
to her den;

And I breathe again.

ON HAMPSTEAD HEATH

Against the green flame of the hawthorn-tree,
His scarlet tunic burns;
And livelier than the green sap's mantling
 glee
The Spring fire tingles through him headily
As quivering he turns

And stammers out the old amazing tale
Of youth and April weather;
While she, with half-breathed jests that, sob-
 bing, fail,
Sits, tight-lipped, quaking, eager-eyed and
 pale,
Beneath her purple feather.

A VISION IN A TEA-SHOP

A VISION IN A TEA-SHOP

His hair lit up the tea-shop like a fire,
The naked flame of youth made manifest—
Young hunger's unappeasable desire
Devouring cakes and cream with eager zest:

While cheek by jowl, an old man, bald and
blind

And peaked and withered as a waning moon,
With toothless, mumbling gums, and wandering
mind

Supped barley-water from a tremulous spoon.

I turned a moment: and the man was gone:
And as I looked upon the red-haired boy,
About him in a blinding glory shone
The sons of morning singing together for joy.

LINES

Addressed to the Spectre of an Elderly Gentleman, recently demised, Whom the Author had once observed performing a Benevolent Office in the Vicinity of Holborn, W. C.

I saw you, seated on a horse's head,
While the blaspheming carter cut the traces,
Obese, white-waistcoated, and newly fed,
Through bland, indifferent monocle surveying
The gaping circle of indifferent faces.

And now, the news has come that you are
dead,

I see you, while they cut the tangled traces,

LINES

On your own hearse's fallen horse's head,
Through bland, indifferent monocle survey-
ing
The unseeing circle of funereal faces.

THE DREADNOUGHT

Breasting the tide of the traffic, the “Dread-
nought” comes,

Be-ribboned and gay, the first of the holiday
brakes,

Brimful of broken old women, a parish’s
mothers,

Bearing them out for the day from grey al-
leys and slums—

A day in the forest of Epping grown green
for their sakes.

Listless and stolid they crouch, everlastingly
tired,

Mere bundles of patience outworn, half-deaf
and half-blind,

THE DREADNOUGHT

Save only one apple-cheeked grannie, more
brisk than the others,
Who, remembering, with youth in her eyes
and the old dreams desired,
Sits kissing her hand to the drivers who follow behind.

SIGHT

By the lamplit stall I loitered, feasting my
eyes

On colours ripe and rich for the heart's de-
sire—

Tomatoes, redder than Krakatoa's fire,
Oranges like old sunsets over Tyre,
And apples golden-green as the glades of
Paradise.

And as I lingered, lost in divine delight,
My heart thanked God for the goodly gift
of sight

And all youth's lively senses keen and
quick . . .

When suddenly, behind me in the night,
I heard the tapping of a blind man's stick.

THE GORSE

THE GORSE

In dream, again within the clean, cold hell
Of glazed and aching silence he was trapped;
And, closing in, the blank walls of his cell
Crushed stifling on him . . . when the
 bracken snapped,
Caught in his clutching fingers: and he lay
Awake upon his back among the fern,
With free eyes travelling the wide blue day
Unhindered, unremembering; while a burn
Tinkled and gurgled somewhere out of sight,
Unheard of him, till, suddenly aware
Of its cold music, shivering in the light,
He raised himself; and with far-ranging stare
Looked all about him: and, with dazed eyes
 wide

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

Saw, still as in a numb, unreal dream,
Black figures scouring a far hill-side,
With now and then a sunlit rifle's gleam;
And knew the hunt was hot upon his track:
Yet hardly seemed to mind, somehow, just
then . . .

But kept on wondering why they looked so
black

On that hot hillside, all those little men
Who scurried round like beetles—twelve, all
told . . .

He counted them twice over; and began
A third time reckoning them, but could not
hold

His starved wits to the business, while they ran
So brokenly, and always stuck at "five" . . .
And "One, two, three, four, five" a dozen
times

THE GORSE

He muttered . . . “Can you catch a fish
alive?”

Sang mocking echoes of old nursery-rhymes
Through the strained, tingling hollow of his
head.

And now almost remembering, he was stirred
To pity them; and wondered if they'd fed
Since he had, or if, ever since they'd heard
Two nights ago the sudden signal-gun
That raised alarm of his escape, they, too,
Had fasted in the wilderness, and run
With nothing but the thirsty wind to chew,
And nothing in their bellies but a fill
Of cold peat-water, till their heads were
light . . .

The crackling of a rifle on the hill
Rang in his ears; and stung to headlong flight,

BORDERLANDS AND THOROUGHFARES

He started to his feet; and through the brake
He plunged in panic, heedless of the sun
That burned his cropped head to a red-hot
ache

Still racked with crackling echoes of the
gun.

Then suddenly the sun-enkindled fire
Of gorse upon the moor-top caught his eye;
And that gold glow held all his heart's desire,
As, like a witless, flame-bewildered fly,
He blundered towards the league-wide yellow
blaze,

And tumbled headlong on the spikes of
bloom;

And rising, bruised and bleeding and adaze,
Struggled through clutching spines: the dense
sweet fume

Of nutty, acrid scent like poison stealing

THE GORSE

Through his hot blood: the bristling yellow
glare

Spiking his eyes with fire, till he went reeling,
Stifling and blinded, on—and did not care
Though he were taken—wandering round
and round,

“Jerusalem the Golden” quavering shrill,
Changing his tune to “Tommy Tiddler’s
Ground”:

Till, just a lost child on that dazzling hill,
Bewildered in a glittering golden maze
Of stinging scented fire, he dropped, quite
done,

A shrivelling wisp within a world ablaze
Beneath a blinding sky, one blaze of sun.

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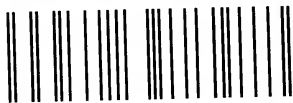
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